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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RUSSIA SEEKS TO CALM SITUATION IN SOUTH OSSETIA,
ACCUSES GEORGIA OF USING DISPROPORTIONATE FORCE

REF: TBILISI 1313

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Alice G. Wells. Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. MFA officials told us August 4 they were working to get direct talks between Georgian and South Ossetian leaders by the end of the week, in efforts to calm the situation there following the violence over the weekend. While acknowledging "provocative actions" by the South Ossetians, the MFA said, both to us and publicly, that Russia believed Georgia had used "disproportionate force." The MFA website also reported on A/S Fried's conversation with DFM Karasin, noting that Russia had called on Tbilisi to take a responsible line and was relying on Washington's "constructive influence." The MFA officials said they had no reports of North Ossetian "volunteers" crossing the border to fight in South Ossetia, and said they were not encouraging them to do so. While supportive of the OSCE CIO's visit in a few weeks, South Ossetian envoy Popov stressed the need for direct Tskhinvali-Tbilisi engagement now. The MFA put the number of women and children evacuated at 200, although at least one media report put it at over 2500. The MFA also confirmed that Russia was ready to open the border at Verkhni Lars on a "limited basis" as soon as Georgia agreed. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Russian Joint Consultative Commission Co-Chair and South Ossetia Special Envoy Yuri Popov told us August 4 he had been in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali the previous week and had reached a tentative understanding with Georgian Reintegration Minister Yakobashvili and South Ossetian JCC Representative Chuchov that it would be useful for them to get together. After the August 1 violence, Popov said, he put the likelihood of them holding direct talks by the end of the week "at 60-40," with Russia continuing to push hard for direct engagement (While Acting 4th CIS Director Dmitriy Tarabrin told us consideration was being given to including North Ossetian leaders in the talks, Popov made no reference to a JCC format in his comments to us.)

¶3. (C) While acknowledging the "provocative actions" of the South Ossetians, and noting that he believed the recent violence had been provoked by the "pre-arranged and controlled" explosion of the police vehicle, Popov said the GOR still believed the Georgian response was "disproportionate," particularly the mortar bombing of Tskhinvali's residential district, which had caused Ossetian civilian casualties. In a statement posted on its website August 4, the MFA said DFM Karasin had told Georgian FM Vashadze that Moscow was seriously concerned over the escalation of tensions in the region due to Georgia's disproportionate use of force.

¶4. (C) Popov said the CIS peacekeeping unit had told him there had been military maneuvers on both sides, and that Georgia had assembled a small force, with armor, near Gori. Acting 4th CIS Director Dmitriy Tarabrin told us the Russian CIS Peacekeeping Commander was trying to calm the situation in South Ossetia (although media reported the Commander said Russian commandos could be brought in if necessary to help Russian citizens in South Ossetia).

¶5. (C) Popov noted the exchange of assurances between First DFM Denisov and FM Vashadze and underscored that there had been no incidents the night of August 3. He was concerned, however, that there might be some outbreaks of violence on the day of the funerals. Tarabrin confirmed that Georgian FM Vashadze would travel to Moscow Sunday.

Volunteers Not Sought

¶6. (C) Tarabrin said the reports of North Ossetian "volunteers" responding to Kokoity's call to go fight in South Ossetia were more "declaratory" than reflective of reality, but noted there was a lot of high emotionalism in the region. Popov told us the GOR had no reports of North Ossetians crossing the border, and Russia was not encouraging them to do so. Popov termed Kokoity's evacuation of women and children a "demonstration of force" that concerned the GOR. Tarabrin told us Russia had reports of about 200 women and children being evacuated (although at least one press report put the number at approximately 2500).

American "Constructive Influence" Acknowledged

¶7. (U) In another statement August 4, the MFA reported on the phone conversation between A/S Fried and DFM Karasin, noting that Karasin had expressed concern at "illegal actions by Georgia to increase the presence of its armed forces in the region and its uncontrolled construction of fortifications." The MFA said it had called on Tbilisi to "take a responsible line," and was also counting on "constructive influence" from Washington. The statement added that A/S Fried shared the view that it was necessary to resolve the current problems exclusively by peaceful means.

Finnish Initiative

¶8. (C) When pressed to endorse Finnish efforts, Popov said Russia would welcome the Chairman-in-Office's visit expected a few weeks from now, and was hopeful it would yield results. However, he stressed that direct engagement was required now between the South Ossetians and GOG. The international community "shouldn't wait so long," he concluded.

Russia Ready to Open Border with Georgia

¶9. (C) Tarabrin confirmed the report (reftel) that the GOR had proposed reopening the border at Verkhni Lars on a "technological basis," i.e. a limited opening for approximately 1500-1600 vehicles a day, and only for a few months. The border crossing would then be closed again for the winter to allow the remainder of the reconstruction work to be completed. Tarabrin said Russia was ready to open it as soon as the Georgian side accepted the proposal.

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